

**Interview with Officer Tom Black
Conducted by Linda Byrne for the
Providence District History Project Providence Perspective**

Linda: Today is February 22, 2008 and I am here, Linda Byrne, with Officer Thomas Black at Supervisor Smyth's office for the purposes of an interview for the Providence Perspective History Project. Good afternoon Officer Black.

Tom: Hello

Linda: Could you start by giving us your name, where you are living now and go back to where you were born?

Tom: Yes, it is Tom Black and I basically live in the town of Vienna so I don't live very far away, probably less than a mile from this actual district office. I was born in Detroit, MI and then from Detroit I think we move to Ohio then to California back to Detroit and eventually I did end up in Fairfax County when I was in third grade.

I actually grew up in Mantua and I lived there until my junior year in high school. In my junior year we actually moved over near Robinson High School but I continued to go to W.T. Woodson the entire time I went to high school. Then from high school I went to George Mason University and I stayed there until I applied to the police department in December of 1981, was accepted and started the Police Academy and sometime in the middle of 1982 I was assigned to the McLean District Station for the police.

Linda: What area does that station cover?

Tom: Geographically McLean District Station actually covers a large portion of the county and the easiest way to describe it is that it covers the Potomac River all the way to Rt. 50, across the middle basically, closer to Loehman's Plaza for a landmark and the other end borders the Falls Church City line along Annandale Road. The other side of the big box, if you want to call it that, goes along kind of a Reston, Oakton border up to Fairfax City

and so it is kind of a huge box and in the middle of that box of course is the Tyson's Corner Center, which is a fairly populated area.

Linda: How many officers' do you have that cover that big box in this area?

Tom: The McLean Station has, it varies maybe 110 or 120 officers assigned to it. We have three shifts to cover the area and a normal shift has maybe 13 to 14 officers out there so it is not as many as people think but there is an overlap period between the different shifts, which are usually during our peak time so that manpower would double at that particular time.

Linda: Well, having grown up here in the Providence District and as you said in the third grade in Mantua you have seen a lot of changes over the years.

Tom: I remember pulling in actually when we moved here from Michigan. It was the first time we came here, we drove from Michigan and I remember pulling up at Gallows Road and Rt. 50, which was a stop sign and Yorktown Shopping Center was there so we made the right into the Yorktown Shopping Center because there was some logistic issue at the house we bought at Mantua. I had never visited it but at that point my mom and dad had already been there, but for some reason we had to meet somebody there, the real estate agent or somebody but I do remember actually going through that intersection and there was a stop sign and then actually going into our house at Mantua. It was quite a few years ago but things have changed since then.

Linda: Quite drastically.

Tom: Yes, just a little bit.

Linda: Since you have been with the police department could you talk about some of the things you have been handling, crime prevention and I noticed that you do underwater rescue work?

Tom: Yes, right now I am assigned, every district station has a crime prevention unit, there are usually two officers assigned to it and we

basically (of course our biggest project is the neighborhood watch program) are basically a liaison between the District Station and community for a number of things, including businesses.

We attend Homeowners Civic Association meetings we address a lot of the quality of life concerns plus we also deal with the actual crime issues and try to give educational tips on how to make sure their property safer plus we also look at the crime that is going on and the ways to prevent it. That is one of the areas that crime prevention does, it is a fairly active unit and we stay really busy.

We have a lot of meetings and also meetings at night and the other unit, which is a non-standing unit, which is a unit that actually isn't full time is the underwater recovery unit and I clarify that it is recovery and not rescue. If it is a rescue type of thing going on the fire department would handle it but the police department actually covers anything underwater, not the fire department, so when I say recovery it would be anything of course if there was a drowning we would handle that. The majority of things we do is evidence recovery, if someone breaks into a house and steals something and they throw it in the water they would call us, a lot of people don't realize that Fairfax County has a ton of water.

We do cover parts of the Potomac and also cover apartment buildings and every office complex usually has some sort of retention pond and the majority of the diving we are doing is very disgusting, ugly dirty water where people throw things and that is where we dive in. I happen to be the instructor of the team; I am a certified Scuba Instructor in a number of different areas, including public safety so it is something I do on the side, for the police department too.

Linda: How many would be involved in that unit?

Tom: The unit right now has 15 members and again they all have other responsibilities with the police department. We train once a month and we get together and respond at different areas including the Providence District. One of the areas that we have dove in which is very dirty, gross and disgusting is a very large pond at the National Memorial Cemetery and

we had to do some evidence recovery work there where there is a large base under the water and is where the ducks do go to the bathroom. We do wear totally vulcanized rubber suits and face masks so in most cases the water never touches our bodies at any point so it is safe from that side. So we stay very active, we are the largest dive team in this region so we are called not only called for Fairfax County but also assist for other outside jurisdictions too.

Linda: Lets move on to the area here in Merrifield Providence District and some of the other things you might remember over the years. We were talking about the big statue of the RCA Dog on Lee Highway and coming down Lee Highway, if you would share some of your memories.

Tom: The first District police station I went to when I got out of the Academy in 1982 was actually the McLean District Station. I was here for I guess, seven or eight years before I was transferred to our Narcotics Division where I spent another five or six years there and then I did come back to and am actually finishing my career at McLean again.

I remember there were a number of landmarks that everybody remembered at the Merrifield area, of course Captain Pell's stood out and it was a very active place when I was here. Relatively not a lot of problems but a lot of people came and visited and heard about Captain Pell's. I am quite sure a lot of people were upset when it moved to it's location in Fairfax City but it was quite a unique experience for the people who went there, and there are some people who still talk about it.

Probably one of the biggest things I remember, and a lot of people who are new to this area had no idea that there was a drive-in movie theater. The drive-in was at the corner of Gallows Road and Lee Highway. It was a very large drive-in movie theater and probably one of the last ones we saw in the area. That drive in kept us busy because we had a lot of kids who would sneak in and being with the police department we had a few little issues inside there. That changed and the communications were that you did not actually have to be inside the theater but you could sit behind the old Leavitt's Shopping Center and you could sit back there and watch the movie and tune your radio in and usually on a Friday or Saturday night we

would have 40 or 50 cars back there with kids watching the movies at the drive in. This of course presented its own problems and relatively crime wise it wasn't that big of an issue. We were able to remove the people and clean out the area without having any problems. The kids were always good at the movie theaters and of course we always knew about them sneaking in the drive-in on Lee Highway when the theater was there so it was no difference for that place. Kids went there and of course adults went there but as far as any type of crime, it was fairly quiet. So that place for most people in this area who has been here for years and years would remember the Merrifield Drive-in movie theater as being a great landmark.

Next to Captain Pell's there was a big plot of land and nobody could ever figure out why there was a great big statue of a dog there. It was the great big RCA dog that was stationed there for years, nobody really knew why it was there but they were all upset when it left. So one day all of a sudden it was gone but I think that everybody realized the property was sold so they moved on with that. So there were a couple of landmarks that we had other than Captain Pell's.

Linda: Wasn't that a crab house and was there a motel connected with that?

Tom: Unfortunately when I did leave McLean Station I went to the Narcotics Division and I worked there for a number of years and we did run into an issue where some of the people that did work at the crab house actually lived underneath of it. I think there were eight apartments with a common bathroom for all of them and unfortunately every once in a while you get your bad apple and there was one person that was actually selling drugs underneath the place. So we had to do a search warrant not for the restaurant but underneath the restaurant, where the people lived and so we made a couple of arrests for them selling drugs down there but it did resolve the issue. The actual owners of the restaurant were not involved. There were a couple of people who got into some things they should not have so after that we never had any issues there. It was a very unique place to say the least and it was a very busy place.

Linda: Other areas that were around, lets see Midgetville?

Tom: Midgetville off of Cedar Lane, the tales that have been told about that place are very extensive about the different things that went on there. You know to this day I have never seen a midget there but there are a whole lot of people who travel from far places to go see Midgetville because they heard about it. It was just a community with these very small houses that had been there for a very long time and the location is between Cedar Land and the W&O bike trail. It was just a very small community and historically I am not sure when or why it was created but they were just very unique small houses and everybody was convinced that there were these little people just running around that area. So they all wanted to come and see it and they all wanted to come at night because it made the story even better. So, we did have some transient traffic going through there for a period of time.

It is funny because to this day some people still think there was something there and they want to come and visit the area but I believe at this point the houses have been removed and not soon enough for the community around there; because this folklore story about the midgets in this area has gone all up and down the East Coast so a lot of people came from a lot of different directions to look at that. So, Midgetville has never created a huge issue for us as a police department but it was something that needed a little bit of maintenance I case people were coming into the area. So, that place is a legend or was a legend at this point now and hopefully the word is out that it doesn't exist anymore and I am sure the community feels the same way.

We did have the Mayor of Merrifield, I remember the general location he lived over by the VDot property, which is on the other side of Merrifield Plaza there was a wooded area there before they built a great big tower. That was a feat in itself when they built the great big radio tower there and he lived there and didn't bother anybody, we just referred to him as the Mayor of Merrifield. He lived there and was happy and people would stop by and visit him and talk to him and I guess he gave them the words of wisdom and there was never any problem there. Things have changed now, I guess you couldn't get by with that now but back a number of years

ago that was just another classic thing we had in the Merrifield area so we had some very unique things at the time.

Again, for the police department it was a relatively quiet area. It still is relatively quiet in nature and I am sure the people that drive through it would say else wise because traffic has increased. A few more people live here now than they did 20 years ago.

Linda: Speaking about so many people moving into the area, how has that affected the police department?

Tom: The police department in Fairfax County is a relatively small department if you take into consideration it is a large population with about 1.4 million people and Fairfax County is approximately 399 square miles. The Merrifield area has again increased its population like the rest of the county. A few years ago this area was considered the country and then we called it the suburbs and now I think we almost refer to it as an Urban City. It does have its high rises now and before you never saw a high rise in this area and it does have a few more businesses, there is no question about that.

Now we are developing our own Towne Center in Merrifield, actually where the old drive-in movie theater use to be and the Leavitt's Shopping Center so you have seen a lot more people move into the area. There is no question that when you have this many people in the area that crime is going to increase but proportionally I don't believe it has gone up that high for as many people as we have in this area.

There are definitely more people here. They built along the Lee Highway corridor and from when I first moved here there were really no Town Houses and now we have three or four large Town House complexes. We still have a little bit of wooded area left near the Pan Am Shopping Center and we have had our small issues with that area. A couple of years ago we found out that we had a number of people living there in the woods. There was a little tent city in the middle of the woods there; at one point maybe a dozen to 16 or 17 people were living in tents back there. Actually nobody knew they lived there until the leaves fell and the surrounding community

could see this complex down there and again we didn't actually have any problems but there were some issues about having people living in the woods like that. The way I looked at it is they were all living along the creek so they all had waterfront property which is the best you could have in the area, but unfortunately we did have to move them out. We did have Services come and assist on the housing side to make sure everybody was okay. But, that is one of the bigger issues we have had in the past few years is people living in the woods like that and now we are seeing some changes.

Business are changing over of course the Yorktown Shopping Center and the Giant has moved out, the Leavitt's Shopping Center moved out a number of years ago and that is being changed and renovated into different businesses. We have seen a lot of businesses come and go. Home Depot moved into the area which did change a lot because Home Depot did bring a lot of traffic into the area for us, it does deal with a lot of people on a daily basis so again we have to adapt like everybody else so now we have a few more officers that work that area than we did when I first came on almost 27 years ago. So we do keep very active down here.

Further down Lee Highway we have our bike team, we did not have them a few years ago but now we have officers on bicycles and actually we probably keep the majority of the officer's on bicycles. We have bicycle cops along the Lee Highway corridor and they work over in different areas. In the Kingsley Commons we have a satellite police office where they can actually go into, stop by, park their bicycles, rest, we have telephones and we also have another satellite office off of Hollywood Road. A couple of communities have been very nice to give us places where we can actually work out of, it is not a manned police station but I refer to it as more of a resting stop.

The other big thing that probably changed a lot in this area during our lifetime too is they brought Metro into the area we did not have a train 27 years ago. Of course the McLean District Station at one point had three Metro Stations in it and we do actually have concurrent jurisdiction inside the Metro Stations so we do have some responsibilities as a police department for Metro Stations. We actually until a couple of years ago had

the Vienna Metro Station, Dun Loring Metro Station and West Falls Church so that is three Metro Stations in one district which again besides the traffic are some issues that do arise.

A couple of years ago they did some redistricting of the police stations when they opened up the Sully Police Station, the Vienna Metro Station was actually turned over to the Fair Oaks District Station which means now we cover two of the Metro Stations. Again, like anything else they do need some maintenance and we do need to check on them and deal with some issues that do arise and every once in a while you are going to have larceny's from cars and others that we refer to crimes of convenience the easiest target, when you have so many cars parked like that every once in a while some issues will arise.

Linda: The different types of crime that you are seeing in this area, what is the range?

Tom: One of the good things we see down here and I hate to say anything, because whenever you do say something things happen, but as far as residential burglaries and I refer to the Lee Highway, Rt. 50 corridor the majority of the Providence District does not have that many burglaries. We have very few burglaries but what we have seen as time has gone by is larcenies basically it is the easiest target crime and crime of convenience such as breaking into a car or shoplifting with all the business we have here.

Of course, the computer stores with the large Micro Center and Home Depot has had its share of larcenies that take place there so we have seen our share of crime as far as larcenies go but the majority of crimes of convenience are the easiest target.

Unfortunately we did have two years ago a subject that was targeting females at the Dun Loring Metro Station and committed a number of sexual assaults but he was arrested and he did live near by the train station there. Again traffic is also what we respond to such as car accidents and unfortunately McLean is number one in our district station for the most amount of car accidents, but I think we have the most amounts of people too. Tyson's Corner area again has a very large population Monday through

Friday 9-5 which has its share of car accidents so that keeps the officer's not only along the Lee Highway, Rt. 50 corridor busy but also in the other part of our district too.

In general we have seen robberies have picked up on smaller convenience stores not only in Fairfax County but also in the entire region. We have seen a rash of robberies but so far nobody has been hurt in the majority of the ones we have had here in the Providence District they have just been stealing whatever is easy to steal, in most cases they are looking at cash. So there is no question, we have had some crime down here like in any other jurisdiction that with as many people as we have, but if you take as many people as we have and being so close to D.C., it is considerably low in the crime area.

We try to stay on top of it and one of the things we changed a number of years ago is when the Chief Major was here we got more into the community policing. We are trying to get the officers out of the cars and basically into the community and into the businesses and build relationships with the different owners of businesses and homes so that people feel as though they have somebody they can talk too directly. What we did is broke up our District Police Station into different service areas where we have assigned officers to, they are kind of like little small district's and they try to keep the officers in the same area so they do know the community.

Again if there is a problem they know the area fairly well plus they know who to talk too plus they can get the word out when they do see larcenies, particularly shop lifters coming into the areas and in some cases if we are looking for somebody doing robberies they can let the other business owners know what is going on in the area. So that has been a very successful program, the whole community policing and having the police service the areas.

Linda: What do you see happening here in the future? This is such a fast growing area. They are talking about Metro coming into and through Tyson's Corner, to Dulles, so what do you think the future looks like?

Tom: The future looks like a lot more people there is no question. The development of Merrifield Towne Center and of course the development of Tyson's Corner we are now seeing more business and people. I think the department is trying to adapt now and they are also looking at that development at the same time, because we have to develop at the same speed the developers are.

I know they are looking at the next substation as a possibility of actually putting it in the Merrifield area, which would be between the Mason's District Station and the McLean Station something in the middle here. When it comes to police stations the actual location of the facility doesn't really matter. The officer's, basically after the roll call, leave the station so I have always told people that the last place to find a police officer is in a police station, they are actually in their cars which is their office work in this area. So you are probably going to see, if they develop another police station some more officer's on the street because besides the crime is dealing with traffic and one car accident can really cause some issues as far as traffic jams. So, hopefully there will be another police station and you will see some more police officers in the area and it looks like it will be pretty smooth.

I know they are looking at a pedestrian lane, actually a bicycle lane up Gallows Road to the mall, we will see how that goes. It sounds like a good idea; hopefully it is safe I was a bicycle cop for almost eight years you definitely have to stay alert when you ride a bicycle. Bicycle cops that we talked about earlier actually work at night, people assume that bicycle cops basically work only work Monday through Friday 9-5 routine. Actually the bicycle cops that we have in Fairfax County work from about 2:00 pm until 12:00 am in the evening shift so a good portion of their patrolling on the bicycles is actually when it is dark out. So we have our own element of danger riding our bikes out there because we are actually riding on the roads and areas where we have to be just as careful of the traffic.

I think this area here, and again we have always tried to stay on top of it. I think we have done a very good job and I think a lot of people are relatively surprised how low the crime rate actually is.

When you go to other cities and even across the river, the Potomac, and look at areas that are very similar in nature you see the amount of crime and it is surprising that with a smaller police department that we have a maintenance program, which is a good way of describing it, has been very effective over the years. When you talk about crime it is all about target, desire and opportunity. Our criminal element is always looking for a target and they all have a desire and they have to have the opportunity and what we try to do in my section of crime prevention is actually make the opportunity to commit the crime so difficult they go somewhere else.

Our goal is to exceed their desire to commit that crime not only in Fairfax County but in the Merrifield area so that is why the officers stay fairly active and they stay moving in their cars and stay on top of things hopefully before it happens, but in some cases things do happen.

Linda: How do you interact with the local government, such as the Supervisors?

Tom: It is one thing, the officers on the street probably don't interact quite as much but they do through me. One thing about the Crime Prevention Officer is in most cases almost have a one on one relationship with different district supervisors and their staff. The crime prevention is also a very good resource for them plus it is also a good resource for us. There are certain issues that the community will talk to us about and there are some issues that the community wants to talk to the District Supervisor about.

In the McLean District I actually have the Providence District, Linda Smyth's district and Mr. Faust has the Dranesville District and the Hunter Mill District so I actually have three Districts for the Board of Supervisors in McLean District.

Over the years especially the Providence District I probably had the closest relationship over the other two. I believe it has worked for both our benefits. It is another outreach for us and plus there are different resources that I have that can help the District Supervisor and Linda Smyth has different resources that can help me when I go to different Homeowners Association meetings, different Civic Association meetings

and Business Association meetings. This association with the District Supervisors gives us another outlet so we can answer the questions a lot better.

Someone will say can you work as a team and you bring this entire package to their meetings and sometimes you can resolve issues without having multiple meetings. That is something we have done very well in the Providence District by creating these little task forces the old fashion way. I would show up and 90 percent of the questions I couldn't answer and I didn't have the answers because it actually applied to somebody else.

Now we have these quality of life concerns in these communities. What we did is actually had one meeting where we invited everybody to the Board. We had the Health and Zoning and Permit Departments, and of course Supervisor Linda Smyth would be there with her staff along with the police and fire department so when the community had a particular issue we could, in most cases have the right people to answer the questions and issues. Before it would take two to three years to resolve because it had to go through so many different hands before it got to the right person. Now we are actually able to resolve some issues in a month or two because the right people got the questions right then and were able to start looking into it. So, it has been a very successful program it is a model other areas are looking at what we are doing here in the Providence District. Some of the other district stations again have the same type of issues but it was just a resource issue, who we go to.

Linda: Is there a title for that?

Tom: We had a title for it but I can't remember what we called it. I think it was our Providence District Task Force. It was just something that Linda Smyth and her staff actually kind of assisted in putting everybody together and it is just a very successful program to target in most cases community concerns, you know large communities when they start having quality of life issues.

There were also some business issues that we looked at for example if there was a zoning issue where somebody was operating a business that

maybe they should not have or if they weren't within regulations. The nice thing about putting this whole task force together was that we could take this group anywhere in the district and pretty much resolve any problem there was in a very short time because we had all the right players. It took a couple of hit or miss situations to figure out how to get it going right but we did it and it is a very good model to look at if you have communities that have different issues going and by putting everybody together at the same time.

Linda: It makes a lot of sense. Are there any other issues or interesting stories that I haven't asked about that you would like to share?

Tom: That is a tough question. There are always interesting stories in police work. That is why people love inviting police officers around because we always have stories.

This area here is a very fast growing area and things have changed. We have had now our share of issues and problems. One of the craziest things we ever saw and again I hate to say it was crazy it was just so different, was a short time period after the big radio tower went up over at the corner of Lee Highway near Gallows Road there was a gentleman who was protesting something. He actually climbed up there and spent almost two days up in that tower. The thing about it was that he was in a fairly good position and didn't create a lot of issues but then we found out later after the fact that if he had been up another 10 feet there was a microwave dish that was on that tower, and it would have probably been almost like putting somebody in a microwave and they said that would have microwaved his body. But, he spent I forgot what it was, two or three days in the tower which was up pretty high, none of us climbed up there we just pretty much waited. At night they had spotlights on him so they can see him and eventually he did climb back down peacefully, we had no issues. I would have to research that again, that was a number of years ago but I do remember that. Everybody was driving by, lots of people drove by and almost created a traffic jam because once it was on the news everyone had to drive by and look up there and it wasn't the Mayor of Merrifield. I think the Mayor had left by then because the property was redeveloped.

So we have had our things between the movie theater and everybody hanging out in the back there, there was always something going on and the officer's would drive back there we always had something going on.

We had a very good relationship with the Merrifield Garden Center and it seems as though they have been there since day one. It is a very friendly family that owns the Merrifield Garden Center.

So we have seen things between Midgetville and the movie theater, the RCA, Captain Pell's and just the development in general and it has been in a very short period of time just 25 or 26 years you have seen a lot of changes in the Providence District.

Now from the mass transit that came in, the different types of residential things that have gone up to the different shopping centers to the changing of the shopping centers to building Towne Centers, I think the police department has seen a lot of things during that period of time. I think it has been a fairly quiet area because it is almost its own little city in itself so it is enjoyable.

At the police department this will be my 28th year and as of this interview I have 11 months left so pretty much this will be one of the last things that I am doing as I am retiring from the Crime Prevention Program and then moving on to my next career.

Linda: Wonderful. What do you want to do next?

Tom: I don't know. It is like everybody else when you spend this long amount of time on one job I am looking at different positions and I am even considering looking at another position with the county. I have enjoyed almost 28 years with the county so I figure I know the county fairly well and have done well with the Public Relations area for the police department in assisting them so I might start looking to see if there is another position within the county that I might find educational and intriguing as this last job and I think that might be pretty difficult to do.

The police job is a very unique position; you are out in the public all the time. The majority of the time the public does not call the police if they are having a good day so a good portion of my career you deal with some negative stuff but the nice thing about the crime prevention section is that the majority of the things I attend actually are very good response from the community. They enjoy talking to us about a lot of improvements that they are happy with and it is very few negative things that I have happening with the job I have now in crime prevention. It is more of educational tool to teach people about things but we do have problems too and we want to get out there and reach the community. So, I will see I will start looking around and see what other interesting job I can do for my next 25 or 26 years.

Linda: Great. Well I thank you very much for being here this afternoon.

Tom: Thank you.